Delphic maxims

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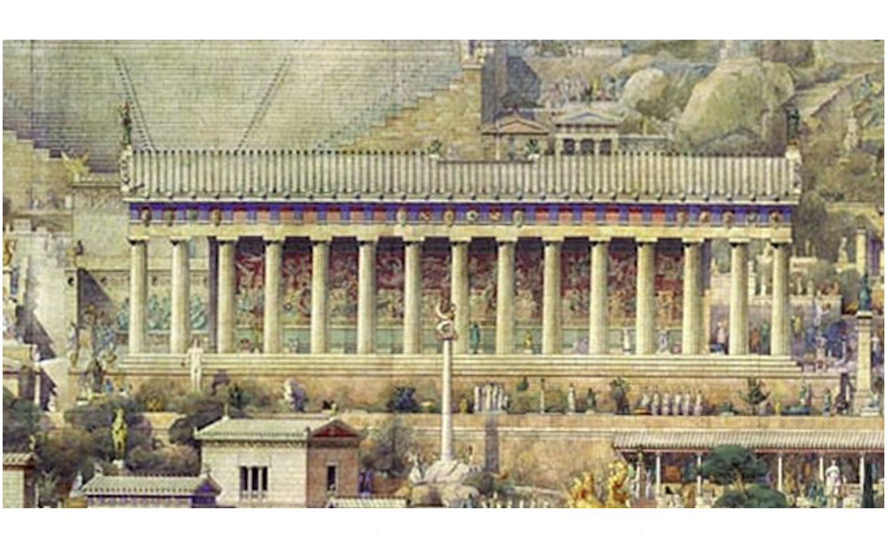
The **Delphic maxims** are a set of moral precepts that were inscribed on the Temple of Apollo in the ancient Greek precinct of Delphi. The three best known maxims – "Know thyself", "Nothing in excess", and "Give a pledge and trouble is at hand" – were prominently located at the entrance to the temple, and were traditionally said to have been authored by the legendary Seven Sages of Greece, or even by Apollo. In fact, they are more likely to have simply been popular proverbs. Each maxim has a long history of interpretation, although the third of the set has received comparatively little attention.



Temple of Apollo at Delphi, by Albert Tournaire

A further 147 maxims, documented by Stobaeus in the 5th century AD, were also located somewhere in the vicinity of the temple. The antiquity and authenticity of these maxims was once in doubt, but recent archaeological discoveries have confirmed that some of the sayings quoted by Stobaeus were current as early as the 3rd century BC.

Entrance maxims

147 maxims of Stobaeus

In the 5th-century anthology of Stobaeus, there is a list of a further 147 maxims attributed to the Seven Sages of Greece.[36]

List of maxims:

No.	Greek	English[b]
001	Ἕπου θεῷ	Follow God
002	Νόμῳ πείθου	Obey the law
003	Θεοὺς σέβου	Worship the Gods
004	Γονεῖς αἰδοῦ	Respect your parents
005	Ἡττῶ ὑπὸ δικαίου	Be overcome by justice
006	Γνῶθι μαθών	Know what you have learned
007	Ἀκούσας νόει	Perceive what you have heard
008	Σαυτὸν ἴσθι	Be yourself
009	Γαμεῖν μέλλε	Intend to get married
010	Καιρὸν γνῶθι	Know your opportunity
011	Φρόνει θνητά	Think as a mortal
012	Ξένος ὢν ἴσθι	If you are a stranger act like one
013	Ἑστίαν τίμα	Honour the hearth (or Hestia)
014	Ἄρχε σεαυτοῦ	Control yourself
015	Φίλοις βοήθει	Help your friends
016	Θυμοῦ κράτει	Control anger
017	Φρόνησιν ἄσκει	Exercise prudence
018	Πρόνοιαν τίμα	Honour providence
019	Ὅρκῳ μὴ χρῶ	Do not use an oath
020	Φιλίαν ἀγάπα	Love friendship
021	Παιδείας ἀντέχου	Cling to discipline
022	Δόξαν δίωκε	Pursue honour
023	Σοφίαν ζήλου	Long for wisdom
024	Καλὸν εὖ λέγε	Praise the good
025	Ψέγε μηδένα	Find fault with no one
026	Ἐπαίνει ἀρετήν	Praise virtue
027	Πρᾶττε δίκαια	Practice what is just
028	Φίλοις εὐνόει	Be kind to your friends
029	Ἐχθροὺς ἀμύνου	Watch out for your enemies
030	Εὐγένειαν ἄσκει	Exercise nobility of character
031	Κακίας ἀπέχου	Shun evil
032	Κοινὸς γίνου	Be impartial
033	Ἴδια φύλαττε	Guard what is yours
034	Ἀλλοτρίων ἀπέχου	Shun what belongs to others
035	Ἄκουε πάντα	Listen to everyone
036	Εὔφημος ἴσθι	Be (religiously) silent
037	Φίλῳ χαρίζου	Do a favour for a friend
038	Μηδὲν ἄγαν	Nothing to excess
039	Χρόνου φείδου	Use time sparingly
040	Ὅρα τὸ μέλλον	Foresee the future
041	Ὕβριν μίσει	Despise insolence
042	Ἱκέτας αἰδοῦ	Have respect for suppliants
043	Πᾶσιν ἁρμόζου	Be accommodated in everything
044	Υἱοὺς παίδευε	Educate your sons
045	Ἔχων χαρίζου	Give what you have
046	Δόλον φοβοῦ	Fear deceit
047	Εὐλόγει πάντας	Speak well of everyone
048	Φιλόσοφος γίνου	Be a seeker of wisdom
049	Ὅσια κρῖνε	Choose what is divine
050	Γνοὺς πρᾶττε	Act when you know
051	Φόνου ἀπέχου	Shun murder
052	Εὔχου δυνατά	Pray for things possible
053	Σοφοῖς χρῶ	Consult the wise
054	Ἦθος δοκίμαζε	Test the character
055	Λαβὼν ἀπόδος	Give back what you have received
056	Ὑφορῶ μηδένα	Down-look no one
057	Τέχνῃ χρῶ	Use your skill
058	Ὃ μέλλεις, δός	Do what you mean to do
059	Εὐεργεσίας τίμα	Honour a benefaction
060	Φθόνει μηδενί	Be jealous of no one
061	Φυλακῇ πρόσεχε	Be on your guard
062	Ἐλπίδα αἴνει	Praise hope
063	Διαβολὴν μίσει	Despise a slanderer
064	Δικαίως κτῶ	Gain possessions justly
065	Ἀγαθοὺς τίμα	Honour good men
066	Κριτὴν γνῶθι	Know the judge
067	Γάμους κράτει	Master wedding-feasts
068	Τύχην νόμιζε	Recognize fortune
069	Ἐγγύην φεῦγε	Flee a pledge
070	Ἁπλῶς διαλέγου	Speak plainly
071	Ὁμοίοις χρῶ	Associate with your peers
072	Δαπανῶν ἄρχου	Govern your expenses
073	Κτώμενος ἥδου	Be happy with what you have
074	Αἰσχύνην σέβου	Revere a sense of shame
075	Χάριν ἐκτέλει	Fulfill a favour
076	Εὐτυχίαν εὔχου	Pray for happiness
077	Τύχην στέργε	Be fond of fortune
078	Ἀκούων ὅρα	Observe what you have heard
079	Ἐργάζου κτητά	Work for what you can own
080	Ἔριν μίσει	Despise strife
081	Ὄνειδος ἔχθαιρε	Detest disgrace
082	Γλῶτταν ἴσχε	Restrain the tongue
083	Ὕβριν ἀμύνου	Keep yourself from insolence
084	Κρῖνε δίκαια	Make just judgements
085	Χρῶ χρήμασιν	Use what you have
086	Ἀδωροδόκητος δίκαζε	Judge incorruptibly
087	Αἰτιῶ παρόντα	Accuse one who is present
088	Λέγε εἰδώς	Tell when you know
089	Βίας μὴ ἔχου	Do not depend on strength
090	Ἀλύπως βίου	Live without sorrow
091	Ὁμίλει πρᾴως	Live together meekly
092	Πέρας ἐπιτέλει μὴ ἀποδειλιῶν	Finish the race without shrinking back
093	Φιλοφρόνει πᾶσιν	Deal kindly with everyone
094	Υἱοῖς μὴ καταρῶ	Do not curse your sons
095	Γυναικὸς ἄρχε	Rule your wife
096	Σεαυτὸν εὖ ποίει	Benefit yourself
097	Εὐπροσήγορος γίνου	Be courteous
098	Ἀποκρίνου ἐν καιρῷ	Give a timely response
099	Πόνει μετ' εὐκλείας	Struggle with glory
100	Πρᾶττε ἀμετανοήτως	Act without repenting
101	Ἁμαρτάνων μετανόει	Repent of sins
102	Ὀφθαλμοῦ κράτει	Control the eye
103	Βουλεύου χρόνῳ	Give a timely counsel
104	Πρᾶττε συντόμως	Act quickly
105	Φιλίαν φύλαττε	Guard friendship
106	Εὐγνώμων γίνου	Be grateful
107	Ὁμόνοιαν δίωκε	Pursue harmony
108	Ἄρρητον κρύπτε	Keep deeply the top secret
109	Τὸ κρατοῦν φοβοῦ	Fear ruling
110	Τὸ συμφέρον θηρῶ	Pursue what is profitable
111	Καιρὸν προσδέχου	Accept due measure
112	Ἔχθρας διάλυε	Do away with enmities
113	Γῆρας προσδέχου	Accept old age
114	Ἐπὶ ῥώμῃ μὴ καυχῶ	Do not boast in might
115	Εὐφημίαν ἄσκει	Exercise (religious) silence
116	Ἀπέχθειαν φεῦγε	Flee enmity
117	Πλούτει δικαίως	Acquire wealth justly
118	Δόξαν μὴ λεῖπε	Do not abandon honour
119	Κακίαν μίσει	Despise evil
120	Κινδύνευε φρονίμως	Venture into danger prudently
121	Μανθάνων μὴ κάμνε	Do not tire of learning
122	Φειδόμενος μὴ λεῖπε	Do not stop to be thrifty
123	Χρησμοὺς θαύμαζε	Admire oracles
124	Οὓς τρέφεις, ἀγάπα	Love whom you rear
125	Ἀπόντι μὴ μάχου	Do not oppose someone absent
126	Πρεσβύτερον αἰδοῦ	Respect an elder
127	Νεώτερον δίδασκε	Teach a youngster
128	Πλούτῳ ἀπίστει	Do not trust wealth
129	Σεαυτὸν αἰδοῦ	Respect yourself
130	Μὴ ἄρχε ὑβρίζειν	Do not begin to be insolent
131	Προγόνους στεφάνου	Crown your ancestors
132	Θνῆσκε ὑπὲρ πατρίδος	Die for your country
133	Τῷ βίῳ μὴ ἄχθου	Do not be discontented by life
134	Ἐπὶ νεκρῷ μὴ γέλα	Do not make fun of the dead
135	Ἀτυχοῦντι συνάχθου	Share the load of the unfortunate
136	Χαρίζου ἀβλαβῶς	Gratify without harming
137	Μὴ ἐπὶ παντὶ λυποῦ	Grieve for no one
138	Ἐξ εὐγενῶν γέννα	Beget from noble routes
139	Ἐπαγγέλλου μηδενί	Make promises to no one
140	Φθιμένους μὴ ἀδίκει	Do not wrong the dead
141	Εὖ πάσχε ὡς θνητός	Be well off as a mortal
142	Τύχῃ μὴ πίστευε	Do not trust fortune
143	Παῖς ὢν κόσμιος ἴσθι	As a child be well-behaved
144	Ἡβῶν ἐγκρατής	As a youth—self-disciplined
145	Μέσος δίκαιος	As of middle-aged—just
146	Πρεσβύτης εὔλογος	As an old man—sensible
147	Τελευτῶν ἄλυπος	On reaching the end—without sorrow

Archaeological evidence

Stobaeus cites a certain Sosiades as his source, but the identity of Sosiades is unknown, and it was once thought that this collection of maxims was of no great antiquity.[38][39] In 1901, however, a parallel collection was discovered at Miletopolis in modern-day Turkey, inscribed on a stele dating from the 3rd or 4th century BC. The stele is broken in two places; the surviving portion carries a list of 56 maxims which closely correspond to those given by Stobaeus, and it is probable that the original text contained all 147.[39][40]

Inscription at Ai-Khanoum, 3rd century BC

Another inscription, discovered in 1966 at Ai-Khanoum in modern-day Afghanistan, presents the final five maxims of Stobaeus, and reports that these maxims were originally found at "holy Pytho", i.e. Delphi. The inscription, dating from the 3rd century BC, reads as follows:[41]

ἀνδρῶν τοι σοφὰ ταῦτα παλαιοτέρων ἀνάκει[τα]ι ῥήματα ἀριγνώτων Πυθοῖ ἐν ἠγαθέαι· ἔνθεν ταῦτ[α] Κλέαρχος ἐπιφραδέως ἀναγράψας εἵσατο τηλαυγῆ Κινέου ἐν τεμένει.	These wise sayings of men of former times, the words of famous men, are consecrated at holy Pytho; from there Klearchos[c] copied them carefully, to set them up, shining afar, in the precinct of Kineas.
παῖς ὢν κόσμιος γίνου, ἡβῶν ἐγκρατής, μέσος δίκαιος, πρεσβύτης εὔβουλος, τελευτῶν ἄλυπος.	When a child, show yourself well behaved; When a young man, self controlled; In middle age, just; As an old man, a good counsellor; At the end of your life, free from sorrow.

The stone which bears this inscription formed the base of a stele, and a small fragment of the stele itself survives. The legible text on the stele, as reconstructed by Louis Robert, reads "Ε[ὐλόγει πάντας], Φιλόσοφ[ος γίνου]", which corresponds to Stobaeus no. 47 and 48 ("Speak well of everyone; Be a seeker of wisdom").[40][43] Robert suggested that the stele and base together bore the full list of 147 maxims, with the final five having been appended to the base due to the stonecutter running out of room.[44] On the evidence of these inscriptions, it is now regarded as certain that the sayings preserved by Stobaeus were once inscribed at Delphi, and that their influence was felt not only in Greece, but throughout the wider Hellenistic world.[44][40]

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References

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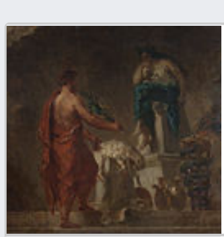

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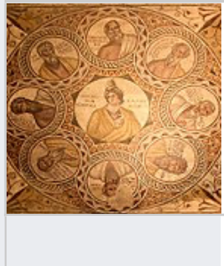
Priestess of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi



Seven Sages of Greece
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